

Challenges of Development in

NORTH-EAST INDIA

Editors

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Preface

Much attention has been focused on North-East India in recent years. The geo-economy of the region offers both prospects and problems. Many look at the region as a periphery of the Indian State. Tensions, largely political and ethnic, continue to hamper the speedier advance of the region. While there is a feeling in the region that the governments had not done enough, it would be fair to say that the central government and the several state authorities have over the years become more sensitive to the people of the region and their aspirations.

Academicians among others have become involved in examining the process of development and its impact on the lives of the people. In this the Indian Council of Social Science Research — North East Regional Centre at Shillong has played a great role in bridging policy and planning, peoples aspirations with the constraints of development and producing an impressive corpus of literature on the region. One of its several activities has been to organise seminars on pertinent themes and then to publish the proceedings of these seminars. In October 2003, the ICSSR-NERC organised a national seminar on *Challenges of Development in North-East India* in which papers were presented on different themes. These papers have been edited and now published in the series of publications of the Centre. The Seminar was financed by ICSSR, New Delhi.

The twenty-three papers in this volume have been grouped in themes covering polity, society, economy, tourism, education and health. All the authors of the articles are persons who either live in the region or have had long academic interest in the region. Their articles therefore reflect much more sensitivity and detail of the North-East.

The editors' work was made much easier with the secretarial support by the staff of the ICSSR-NERC, whose efforts are gratefully acknowledged. We put on record our appreciation of the enthusiastic support of Dr. C.J. Thomas, its Acting Director. We are rest assured that his effort to publish this volume by Regency Publications will meet the high standards set by the ICSSR-NERC.

David R. Syiemlieh
Anuradha Dutta
Srinath Baruah

Contents

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| <i>Preface</i> | iii |
| <i>Contributors</i> | vii |
| <i>Inaugural Address</i> | ix |

POLITY

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1. Ethnicity, Territoriality and Autonomy in India's North-East: From Fragmentary Politics to an Inclusive Social Space — <i>Udayon Misra</i> | 1 |
| 2. Government, Local Self-Government and the Role of the Civil Society — <i>Anuradha Dutta</i> | 12 |

SOCIETY

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 3. Their Right to Migrate; Our Right to Home: Discourses on Migration and Rights in Contemporary North-Eastern India — <i>Samir Kumar Das</i> | 33 |
| 4. Pattern of Migration in Assam (1981–1991): A Study of Inter-District Migration — <i>Runumi Dowerah Baruah</i> | 60 |
| 5. Marwari Collaborators and Nepali Subalterns: Two Integrative Social Forces in North-East India — <i>A.C. Sinha</i> | 102 |
| 6. Land, Migrants, Hegemony: The Politics of Demography in North-East India — <i>Sajal Nag</i> | 126 |

ECONOMY

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 7. Flow of Central Funds and its Impact on North-East Economy — <i>A.K. Agarwal</i> | 146 |
| 8. Natural Resources Base Development Strategies: Problems and Prospects of Manipur — <i>R.K. Ranjan Singh</i> | 176 |

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 9. The Bounty of North-Eastern Waters — <i>B.G. Verghese</i> | 192 |
| 10. Development as 'Complementarity': A Political Economy Critique of Policies and Practices of Development in North-East India — <i>Prasenjit Biswas</i> | 208 |
| 11. Resource, Livelihood and Regulation: Sharing Global Prosperity in North-East India — <i>Kalyan Das</i> | 259 |
| 12. Levels of Human Poverty Across Districts and Population Groups in Assam — <i>Srinath Baruah, M.P. Bezbaruah and R.D. Baruah</i> | 287 |
| 13. Status of Basic Amenities in Meghalaya: Challenges to Development — <i>Susmita Das and Sutapa Sengupta</i> | 308 |
| 14. Border Trade in India's North-East: Theory and Practice — <i>Gurudas Das</i> | 332 |
| 15. Border Trade in Mizoram: Emerging Trends and Future Prospects — <i>K.C. Kabra and R.K.P. G. Singha</i> | 348 |

TOURISM

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 16. Sustainable Tourism and Economic Development of the North-East — <i>M.P. Bezbaruah</i> | 377 |
| 17. Tourism in Assam: Need for a Paradigm Shift — <i>Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed</i> | 410 |
| 18. A Sustainable Environment-Friendly Approach to Tourism Development in Arunachal Pradesh — <i>Amitava Mitra</i> | 428 |

EDUCATION

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 19. Development of School Education among the Tribes of North-East India: A Complementary Approach — <i>N.B. Biswas</i> | 440 |
| 20. Wastage in Elementary Education: A Comparative Study of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh — <i>Anjan Saikia and K.C. Kapoor</i> | 457 |
| 21. Challenges of Higher Education in the North-East — <i>Meghali Baruah</i> | 467 |

HEALTH

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 22. Substance Abuse and HIV/AIDS in North-East India — <i>Hallelahim Ghonglah</i> | 478 |
| 23. Women's Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in Manipur — <i>Jubita Hajarimayum</i> | 485 |

- | | |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Index</i> | 495 |
|--------------|-----|

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Inaugural Address

M.M. JACOB
Governor of Meghalaya

It gives me great pleasure to associate myself with the Seminar on *Challenges of Development of North-East India*. It is in the fitness of things that the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North-Eastern Regional Centre, is organizing this National Seminar to focus attention on the challenges of development of north-east India. I thank the Indian Council of Social Science Research for inviting me to inaugurate the seminar.

The North-Eastern Region has all along been facing various challenges towards her all round development. These challenges cut across the spheres of economy, society and polity. Their resolution, as a result, requires a holistic and comprehensive approach that can unify the interest of various ethnic groups, and synergize the strengths that are inherent in the society, polity and economy.

For the articulation of this holistic approach, one needs to realize the essential features of the region, its history, policies of the Central and State Governments towards the region and its states, and the development process that has been taking place here over the past 50 years and more. Although the interplay of geography and history has made the region a peripheral entity of the Indian state, it offers both prospects and problems.

The nature of the problem is basically the problem of peripheral development. As peripheral development is ordered by the needs of national development, market forces are not strong enough for the immediate utilization of local resources that could have led to resource-based industrialization and economic development.

Agriculture is the main source of income for vast number of people living in rural areas. They used to flourish through barter trade across the border to neighbouring countries, before partition. The Cherrapunjee oranges were known as Sylhet oranges. The pineapple and many other produces had its easy route to other areas of north-east outside the region, reaching up to Kolkata through Bangladesh. Now, after the source of marketing dried up, alternative sources could have developed. I mean, agricultural marketing on a sound footing.

The National Cooperative Development Corporation has resources and expertise to help the Cooperatives with share capital, margin, money etc., provided Agri-Processing Cooperatives are set up. Many of the produces require the help of a nodal agency to procure the produces from the villages, process them and market them to various destinations where the products are in demand. The Meghalaya ginger is an example. The quality of ginger is good which has a market in other South Asian Countries such as Philippines. But ginger needs initial processing and packaging; there is also the possibility of taking ginger oil out of raw ginger and send them as value added items to the market.

Raw rubber produces will fetch more income when it is processed either to convert it as "latex concentrate" or "crumb rubber" that has more durability. The same is true with cashew nut grown in Garo Hills and pineapple grown in many parts including Khasi Hills. Organic farming is also another area which has the possibility of fetching more income, availing the agricultural practice of the local people.

Animal husbandry is another neglected area in the region. The climate is conducive for cattle breeding, piggery etc. But one is amazed to see truck loads of eggs reaching from far away states of India, and cattle come to this region by road (foot march) even from central India as common man's diet consists of such meat.

Fisheries are also not properly developed, forcing the people to depend on fish transported from distant and far away states outside the region. The experiment of Gujarat Amul Milk Cooperative should have encouraged production of milk products. All these require high investment, administrative efficiency and political will.

Meghalaya has abundant coal and limestone, beside other materials. But no serious attempt has been made to convert this

raw material to value added items. Quality cement could have easily been manufactured in the region, giving employment to a large number of local youth.

Moreover, the existence of a multitude of ethnic identities having a bewildering set of community-specific rules that govern and order the socio-political space has further aggravated the problem of structuring them in accordance with the needs of market forces.

For restructuring the social space to make it conducive to economic development, we need to improve the quality of human resources investing more on education and health care.

Inadequate infrastructure development such as village roads and rural electrification retards the growth of good schools, good medical aid centers in the villages. Because of the absence of these basic amenities, officers/persons appointed to such areas in schools or health centers do not regularly attend their place of posting.

Decentralization of quality education service is inevitable for overall development of the area. There should be colleges at each district headquarters with post-graduate facilities and the North Eastern Hill University should concentrate more on advance and research studies than on conducting graduate level courses.

The unique land tenure system and land holding by certain people deters long term investment in this area even after village communities accept the project. Militancy related crime such as extortion, abduction etc., lead to bad propaganda which most of the time is not fully true. The local community has to take special initiative for more investment by tying up with outside resources for the betterment of local people.

The major setback in the health care front is also the lack of trained technicians in many of the hospitals and health centers. More and more para-medical staff, technicians and the nurses recruited from rural areas can face this challenge. Similarly, shortage of trained teachers in schools, hamper the process of providing quality education.

For upgrading the productive structure, we need to accelerate the profitable use of local resource base, including its tremendous water resource. Resource exploration may get a boost once the border trade with the neighbouring countries flourishes.

Trade resource utilization has already been established in case of Meghalaya-Bangladesh border trade. This trade has led to the

exploration of coal and limestone in Meghalaya at a large scale. Meghalaya also has a lot of potential to trade services across the border. The potential for border trade is also evident in Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam and Sikkim.

In the absence of Panchayati Raj Nagarpalika set up, traditional bodies and District Councils must play a crucial role in development. Investment of village level institutions in the development process is very critical in the overall progress of this area.

With the experience of what happened in Byrnihat, where land was made available for industrialists who are willing to invest in this area, is an eye-opener for all of us. Power at this moment is insufficient. Immediate arrangement for small schemes, either micro or mini hydro-electric projects, which can cater to the villages where they are not available at the moment, need to be made.

However, for all these to happen, we need responsible governance both at local and regional level. A partnership between government and business at the grassroots level is needed.

In my opinion, the level of participation, the urge and quality of discussion can alone determine the ultimate success of any such endeavour and the same applied to this seminar.

I am confident that the deliberations of this seminar will prove to be useful and some of the critical issues with regard to the challenges for development in North-East India will be given due attention.

I have great pleasure in inaugurating this seminar and wish it every success.

CHAPTER 1

Ethnicity, Territoriality and Autonomy in India's North-East From Fragmentary Politics to an Inclusive Social Space

UDAYON MISRA

The entire north-eastern region of India is today caught in a vicious circle. Assertions of identity often leading to insurgent movements have invariably had their roots in economic deprivation and, these in turn, have acted as major impediments to development. Therefore, from whichever angle one tries to perceive it, the issues related to development in the north-eastern region of the country are inextricably linked to the different ethnic movements and, in several cases, their militant manifestations. The common refrain that is heard is that development in the region is destabilized because of the ongoing insurgency and the rather unstable socio-economic scenario. It is true that the presence of different insurgent outfits and their manner of functioning have been adversely affecting capital investment in this region. But, it is equally true that decades of central indifference to the region's economic potential has today created the vicious cycle of insurgency and underdevelopment. The economics of "colonial" exploitation spurred on by the politics of alienation practised by New Delhi for several decades after independence has today placed the entire region in a very difficult bind. To get out of it would need serious and unrelenting efforts both at the governmental and the civil society levels.

The situation in the north-east has been made more complex by the revivalist ideas and the exclusionist mindset which have come to characterise most of these identity/autonomy struggles. Given the ethno-demographic complexity of the north-eastern region, it would, therefore, be interesting to see how the Indian state has reacted over the years to the struggles for autonomy and how such reactions have been reflected in the constitutional-judicial process of the country. Although, on the whole, the state's role in providing space to the socio-cultural and political aspirations of the small nationalities of the region has been quite marginal, yet it must be said that provisions like the Sixth Schedule and the creation of new states with distinct constitutional safeguards covering the traditional rights of the ethnic nationalities, have been creative and innovative responses to the challenge to the nation-building process posed by the various struggles for autonomy/self-determination, both militant and otherwise. But given the highly centralised form of government and planning in the first four decades after independence, it was but inevitable that provisions like the Sixth Schedule remained quite ineffective. State-activism proved to be a major hindrance in the development process because it encouraged at various levels the psychology of dependency as against collective or even individual initiative.

The changed world economic scenario of the nineties and the strengthening of federal ideas within the country have, in recent years, brought to the fore the need to decentralise economic power and involve the people at the grassroots level in the development process as was reflected in the Constitution (Seventy Third) Amendment Act of 1992. The changed situation has also added greater relevance to provisions like the Sixth Schedule as also to the different traditional structures of power in tribal societies. It however remains to be seen as to how the traditional power structures can co-exist effectively with the district councils under the Sixth Schedule so as to ensure the autonomous status of the communities concerned and help in the process of development. While these issues could be sorted out through different stages of experimentation of power-sharing at the people's level, the question of individual rights as well as the rights of minority groups/communities vis-à-vis the political and cultural rights of the majority community would, in the long run, emerge as a central point of debate. This issue has gained a new sense of urgency because the question

of autonomy has become inextricably linked with that of territoriality, resulting in serious inter-ethnic clashes in areas where different ethnic groups have been co-existing peacefully for centuries. The clashes between the Nagas and the Kukis or the Hmars and the Dimasas are clear pointers in this direction, not to speak of the tensions released by the NSCN demand on Greater Nagalim.

The Indian state has been responding to the different ethnic/autonomy movements by trying to provide them politico-geographical space by re-drawing already existing boundaries and by creating new states. But, in the process, the interests of certain communities have suffered and the situation has been marked by violent clashes, attempts at ethnic cleansing, cross-border attacks, road blockades etc. Thus, where boundaries have been re-drawn with a view to accommodate the wishes of the majority, large sections of people outside a particular linguistic/ethnic parameter have been marginalised and their democratic rights jeopardised. This has been all the more true with those states where the majority community/communities have been provided with reservations in the legislature. All this is bound to affect the development process adversely because there can be no development in isolation. It is against this complex scenario that one must attempt to see the questions related to ethnicity, territoriality and autonomy from a new perspective. Questions must be raised as to whether further re-mapping of territory would meet demands for autonomy and development or it would set in motion a reverse process by encouraging the forces of obscurantism and revivalism. Also, the question of autonomy and territoriality must be viewed from a new angle. Efforts must be made to replace state activism with people's activism and in this, the traditional structures of power and civil society organisations can be made to play a meaningful role. One may cite here the exemplary role played by civil society organisations in Nagaland in defusing tension between the Manipuris and the Nagas following the first NSCN(IM)-GOI accord on an integrated Nagaland. Efforts at all levels must be made to replace State paternalism and dominance by people's initiative, and this would call for a radical change in the overall mindset. A time perhaps has arrived for the different nationalities/communities of the north-eastern region to move away from rigid, exclusionist stances on political and cultural autonomy and to engage themselves in working out

strategies of economic co-operation based on mutual inter-action and inter-dependence.

In order to understand the link between the underdevelopment of the north-eastern region and the growth of ethnic movements and autonomous/insurgent politics, it would be necessary to go back a bit in history and take up for discussion the debate on the sharing of federal powers, both political and economic, that took place in the Constituent Assembly just prior to independence. It may be recalled here that in the Constituent Assembly debates, the members from the north-eastern region representing both the hills and the plains of undivided Assam had made a concerted attempt to force the centre to concede a certain degree of political and financial autonomy to the states and had demanded economic decentralisation. It is significant to note here that the Congress party in Assam had harboured strong autonomous sentiments right from the days of its inception and in his discussions with the Cabinet Mission, Gopinath Bardoloi had wanted the centre's powers to be restricted to defence, foreign relations and special emergency powers together with the right to raise taxes for these purposes. Bardoloi, on behalf of the Assam Congress, had demanded the "full-est possible autonomy" for the province so that Assam could "utilise its resources in its own interest."¹ Almost all the members from Assam demanded in the Constituent Assembly that the Central List should not be made unduly long and that the powers of the states should not be reduced. For instance, Kuladhar Chaliha cautioned the Constituent Assembly that curtailing the powers of the states would have a "disintegrating effect" and "the provinces will try to break away" from the rest of the country.² While Rohini Kumar Choudhury moved an amendment which wanted that seventy five per cent of the excise duties on tea should accrue to the state producing it, Bardoloi demanded that the same percentage be paid to the petroleum and kerosene producing states. The Khasi leader, J.J.M. Nichols Roy declared that "if the excise and export duties on tea and petroleum are allotted to us which give about eight crores annually from Assam alone to the coffers of the Government of India, we shall have enough resources to finance our developmental schemes all round" (*Constituent Assembly Debates*, VII, 227). Assam lost its fight in the Constituent Assembly to secure greater financial and political autonomy for the provinces. But the issues that were raised in the Constituent Assembly were to assume

important dimensions in the years to come, especially in the context of growing insurgent politics in the north-eastern region. Unfortunately, it has taken the central leadership unduly long to realize that only through devolving power to the grassroots level could the people's confidence be secured in the fight against secessionist ideas.

The debate centred around development took on a new edge after independence. The partition of the country delivered a severe blow to the economy of Assam and the north-eastern region by turning the region virtually overnight into a land-locked zone. The region's railway link with the rest of the country remained snapped and trade and commerce in the districts, bordering East Pakistan came to a near-halt. This had a significant effect on the economic situation of the state of Assam and development received a major blow. Even today, the situation has not been redeemed and efforts are on to restore normal trade and communication links with neighbouring Bangladesh. The economic effects of Partition were made much more complicated by the flow of refugees from East Pakistan into the province and the consequent pressure put on the state government by the centre to make more and more space for the refugees. The issue reached such proportions that the centre threatened to cut off economic aid to the region if the state leadership did not bow to its wishes. One may refer to the acrimonious exchanges between Nehru, Patel and Bardoloi on the question of settling refugees in Assam (which at that time meant almost the entire north-eastern region barring present-day Arunachal, Manipur and Tripura). This was the period when Assam continued to move down the scale of economic development. For instance, in 1950-51, on the threshold of the planning era, the per capita income of Assam was higher than the national average by Rs. 50.4. In the course of three and a half decades of planning, the state not only lost its initial edge but continued its steady downward slide much below the national average. It has further been shown that even when the annual growth rate of the region was maintained at level with the all-India rate, the gap between Assam and the rest of the country in terms of per capita income kept widening. While the problem of regional imbalances has been in the full gaze of the planners ever since the beginning of the planning era, the aggravation of the problem during the long decades of planning added a new and serious dimension to it.³ The highly

centralised form of planning which was introduced further added to the region's woes, with industrial development virtually coming to a standstill. However, without going into the debate about the centre's "colonial exploitation" of the region, it would perhaps be sufficient to say that the extractive nature of the economy practiced by the British did not undergo any major change in the first few decades of independence.

In this connection it is relevant to focus on the type of mindset regarding the north-eastern region that was at play in the centre, because it was precisely this mindset which added to the sense of alienation amongst the people, especially the youth. This is amply illustrated in the centre's position regarding the setting up of the first oil refinery in Assam. Reacting to the demand for the refinery by the Assam Government, Nehru wrote to the then Chief Minister, B.R. Medhi, that for security reasons, such a refinery could not be set up in the state. Hence it was decided to pump out the crude oil from Assam to Barauni in Bihar by laying a 1500 kilometre pipeline involving astronomical costs. Many analysts of the north-east have attempted to link the slow pace of development to the effects of partition and the lack of infrastructure in the region. While this is partly true, it needs to be remembered that as revealed in the Constituent Assembly debates, there was little sympathy for the region in New Delhi. For this one must go back further to the days of the Cabinet Mission Plan when Assam Congress successfully resisted the Grouping Scheme which was favoured by the top all-India Congress leaders like Nehru, Patel and Azad. Nehru never felt at ease with Bardoloi who spoke on equal terms and he perhaps could not forget Bardoloi's winning over Gandhi to Assam's cause. These may be termed as speculations but there is some gist to it. Or else, how can one explain the centre's apathy towards the Assam Congress leadership. This apathy was adequately reflected in the centre's attitude towards Assam's development. Hence, it may be said that the economics of underdevelopment and "colonial" exploitation has been spurred on by the politics of alienation practised by the centre. The slow pace of development of the north-eastern region cannot, therefore, be discussed without taking into account the overall attitude of the centre towards this region in the first three decades or so after independence. When we look back today, it appears rather strange that the first bridge over the Brahmaputra in

Assam came only after the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962! This clearly showed how much of importance the centre attached to developing the communication network of the north-eastern region.

In what may be clearly seen as a fall-out of the highly centralised economic policies of the Indian state in the first three decades or so after independence, several mass movements took place in Assam demanding speedier economic development and the right of the states over their resources. Thus, the first mass agitation in Assam in 1957 was the movement for a refinery. It is to be noted that in this mass agitation, all shades of political opinion of the state were involved. Several successive mass movements in Assam were also centred on economic demands, although the attention is usually focussed on the state's linguistic agitations. The outburst of January 1968 known as the Lachit Sena attacks primarily on Rajasthani traders of Guwahati, must be seen against the growing unemployment scenario of the state and the shrinking opportunities for the youth. This is true even of the AASU's several programmes focussed on economic issues. It was only in the late seventies and the early eighties that populist movements in the state came to focus almost entirely on the "foreigners" issue. This needs no elaboration and it is commonly agreed upon today, even by the detractors of the Assam Movement, that the increasing pressure on cultivable land and the fear of the ethnic population of being economically and politically marginalised because of swift demographic change, acted as the major spurs for the movement, its surface chauvinism and xenophobia notwithstanding. What I am stating here should not be seen as part of a common refrain against the centre. We must remember that till the eighties, we were dealing with a government at the centre which was highly centralised. I am referring to this only to show that the highly centralised approach of the Indian state combined with a mindset which was not sensitive to the development needs of the region contributed in a large measure to the growth of different ethnic/autonomous movements which in turn have led to an unstable socio-political situation, thereby hampering the economic progress of the region. The vicious circle of underdevelopment — militancy — further underdevelopment had begun. And, even as the Indian state adopted increasingly repressive measures to control the autonomous/insurgent movements, the situation kept on growing more and more complicated. The challenges to development in the

north-eastern region took on new dimensions. Even in the states which were carved out of composite Assam, the lack of economic opportunities encouraged the growth of militant politics which posed fresh challenges to the new tribal leadership.

However, it was from the post-emergency period that one perceives a change in the centre's approach towards the states. The changed political situation in the country coupled with developments in the international scene brought in a period marked by gradual devolution of power to the states, and finally to the regional and local levels. But, without any change in social relations at the grassroots level, such devolution has been found to be anfractuous in many states where caste and community considerations determine economic power and relationships and where land reform measures have fallen woefully short of the required scale and dimension. In the north-eastern region, however, the situation may be said to be quite different. The existence of traditional power structures and the presence of a relatively less caste-ridden society have proved to be encouraging factors in the march towards development. The creation of several new states as a response to popular movements and the attempt to devolve some power at least to the grassroots level have added new significance to the socio-political scenario of the region.

The central perspective started changing somewhat from the seventies as is evidenced in the move to acknowledge some of the major demands thrown up by the different ethnic/autonomous movements of the region. An attempt was finally made to move away from what may be termed as a highly centralised approach built on the concept of a homogenous nation-state, to that of a more pluralistic one. Demands for autonomy were attempted to be met by (a) creation of separate states as in the case of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, (b) creation of autonomous councils within states, and (c) creation of autonomous territorial units within already existing states. There is no doubt that these were commendable experiments which proved the accommodative power of the Indian Constitution. But these steps could not stem the spate of militant ethnic/autonomous movements which overtook the region in the nineties and which resulted in a large degree of bloodshed. Exclusionist and fragmentary politics became the order of the day and inter-ethnic clashes claimed hundreds of lives.

One is quite acquainted with the course both of the Assam and Bodo Movements and the severe inter-ethnic clashes that took place in the region. It is highly disturbing that the focus of several of these ethnic struggles seemed to have shifted from an anti-state position to one directed against neighbouring communities. Moreover, when the issue of territory got mixed with ethnic demands, the situation grew even more complex. The Indian state has been responding to these demands by trying to provide autonomous political structures and also geographical space by re-drawing boundaries. But in the process, the interests of certain communities have suffered and ethnic clashes, attempts at ethnic cleansing, cross-border attacks, road blockades etc., have occurred. Where boundaries have been re-drawn with a view to accommodate the wishes of the majority community in areas inhabited by heterogenous groups, it is often seen that large sections of people outside particular linguistic/ethnic parameters have been marginalised and their democratic rights jeopardised. In this connection one may refer to the apprehensions of the plains tribals of Assam following the Assam Accord and the strong reservations that the Koch-Rajbanshis have been having over the creation of a separate homeland for the Bodos. This exclusionist politics of ethnic identity, often marked by obscurantism and regression, is bound to adversely affect the development process which is being increasingly tied up with the global economy. Thus, when we talk of challenges to development in the north-east region, we must be prepared to debate seriously on all issues related to ethnicity, autonomy and territoriality. The question of individual rights and identity needs to be seen apart from ethnic and community rights. Questions related to pluralism and diversity and the rights of minority communities must also be seen from newer angles. Hence, the question of territoriality, autonomy and the role of the community must be viewed from a new perspective, precisely because these issues pose a challenge to the question of development in the north-east region.

Surely these issues cannot be left to the state to resolve. For, the state is not in a position to do that. On the contrary, whenever the state has interfered actively in these issues, they have been further complicated. Therefore, it is here that the people's activism is called for. It is here that we come to the role of civil society

in the north-eastern region. Despite its inherent limitations, civil society organisations — even traditional power structures — can play a meaningful role in carving out an inclusive social space. This may be seen in the efforts of the Naga Hoho in Nagaland and of the student and youth organizations in Assam and Manipur. Efforts must be made to replace state activism with people's activism. This would call for a change in the mindset. The time has arrived when the different nationalities/communities of the north-east region must move away from their exclusionist stances on political and cultural autonomy and work out strategies of economic co-operation based on mutual interdependence and inter-action. Reference has already been made to the issues raised in the Constituent Assembly debates when the members from the north-eastern region unitedly stood up against the centre to gain certain concessions. These issues have today gained a special significance in the context of economic liberalisation and decentralisation. Moreover, in the past fifty years and more, the Indian nation-state has also gone through a learning process and has tried to give some space to the different nationalities that constitute it. No doubt a lot remains to be achieved in the matter of community/nationality rights. Nevertheless, it is a fact that recent years have seen a strengthening of federal ideas and certain genuine attempts to devolve power to the grassroots level. Therefore, in such a situation efforts must be made to see things from a broader perspective which would accommodate the aspirations of the diverse community groups. It must be realised that community and group rights cannot thrive in isolation and that it would certainly be self-defeating in the long run if one continues to view matters exclusively from a narrow ethnic position. The situation must be created which would compel the state to widen the involvement of the people in the process of government by making the district councils, panchayats and the traditional structures of power. It must be remembered that constrictive ideas of identity and state protectionism must be replaced by inter-community and inter-ethnic co-operation. Fragmentary politics must be replaced by an inclusive social space. This is all the more relevant in the light of certain major changes in the international scene.

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